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# Central America Asks How Far U.S. Will Go

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**W**HILE the Reagan Administration seems eager to climb back into the driver's seat of the Nicaraguan guerrilla movement, Central American military and political leaders appear to view the growing war against the Sandinistas with decidedly mixed feelings.

Nicaragua's popularity with its neighbors seems to be at a low point. Honduran, Guatemalan, Salvadoran and Costa Rican officials harshly criticize the Sandinistas' narrowing revolution, their reliance on Cuba and the Soviet Union, and their sharp military build-up. But there is also real debate about whether the Sandinistas should be contained or destroyed.

And while the majority of regional officials are probably hawks on the issue, they seem to doubt that the United States will make the commitment necessary to give the rebels a chance of success.

Many analysts believe the United States would have to invade Nicaragua to finish the job, which seems unlikely to them. "There has been a lack of seriousness in this from the start," an influential Honduran army officer said recently. "Four years ago, we told American officials they had to make a commitment to defeat the Sandinistas completely, or else it would be a failure. There still isn't that kind of commitment."

United States officials in the region concede that the Central Americans have reason to worry. The memory of Vietnam and the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba is as strong in Central America as in Washington.

## Costa Rican Caution

"They know we've done this sort of thing before and then walked away," an American official said. "If you change the rules and walk away from the game often enough, you get to the point where people don't want to play ball with you any more."

Caution appears to be on the minds of all Nicaragua's neighbors in some measure.

Costa Rica's new Government has taken the most reserved stance, closing Nicaraguan rebel bases and airstrips while warning guerrilla leaders to spike their muskets if they want to stay in the country.

In Guatemala, the army and businessmen have aided the guerrillas, rebel sources say, but the Government has kept them at arm's length.

El Salvador and Honduras, each almost totally dependent on American aid and worried about Sandinista military expansion, have become the main bases for rebel operations. But even in these countries, there appears to be continual debate in the Government and army over whether it is in their interest to back a war that will hold enduring costs if Washington's commitment falters, as it might in the hands of a new Congress or a new President.

The rebel campaign has already brought a measure of discomfort. As many as 300,000 Nicaraguan refugees have poured into Honduras and Costa Rica, and business investment has plunged because of the war. And while the effort to break the Sandinistas may be publicly debated in Washington, Central American states must still cloak their role

behind the protective shrouds of diplomatic deniability — no easy task when so much is known about the unsecret war.

The political cost of being caught backing the guerrillas can be high. Nicaragua is suing Honduras and Costa Rica in the International Court of Justice at The Hague for allowing the rebels to maintain bases in their territory. When the Sandinistas launched an all-out attack on guerrilla camps inside Honduras six months ago, there was little the Honduran Government could do about it. El Salvador, meanwhile, is ducking extensive evidence that rebel supply operations have been run from the main Salvadoran air force base.

There is more than a touch of calculation in the Sandinistas' outraged protests at their neighbors' meddling. Sandinista commanders ran their own military supply lines through Costa Rica and Honduras in the years when they were fighting the Somoza dictatorship. They also still provide planning and rest facilities for the guerrilla movement that is waging a punishing war inside El Salvador. But the Sandinistas' carefully measured resort to protests before the United Nations and the World Court appears to have been effective. By challenging their neighbors' participation in the war, the Sandinistas reinforce their own claim to legitimacy and also reveal the rebels' lack of broad international backing.

Protests alone, however, are unlikely to stop the guerrillas. Honduras and El Salvador may not allow the Central Intelligence Agency to train rebel commanders on their territory, as has been reported in Washington. Then again, some officials hint, a bit of training may go on despite the public denials. Backed by 1,000 American troops, stronger security guarantees and now a pledge of new American or Israeli jet fighters, Honduras in particular seems unlikely to close its door to the growing rebel army.

But the uncertainty about long-term United States aims and commitment may continue to make regional support for the rebel war less than whole-hearted. One of the first questions Central American officials ask a visitor from the north is: "What will the United States do in Nicaragua?" Because they don't know the answer they are likely to keep their options open.